

**Paying Attention to Transitions in Public Schools**

Robert Bardwell

Public schools are slowly figuring out that transitions really do matter. For years, most public schools halfheartedly participated in the obligatory new student orientation programs: tours, classroom presentations, parent programs, and teacher communications. And in small districts with perhaps only one elementary, one middle, and one high school, educators often may have felt that developing a transition program was simply going through the motions.

But the truth is that students have more school choices than ever before. With charter schools, school choice vouchers, and other options under the No Child Left Behind Act, students can escape schools that are failing them. One way that schools can help their students succeed is by paying attention to important transitions. As educators, we need to do a better job of making the transition from one building to another or from grade to grade seamless for our students. Ignoring these turning points can put students at a clear disadvantage.

Here are some ideas for improving your school's transition program, regardless of what grade or building level you work in, to help students feel emotionally safe during their transitional periods.

**Provide an Opportunity to Experience the New Grade Level**

This idea perhaps works best for building-to-building transitions, but it can also be used for helping younger students with grade-to-grade transitions. The key to the success of this program is to ensure that you have well-trained students at the higher grade level to act as mentors and tour guides for the visits.

Scheduling such visits will be time intensive, particularly if you have large numbers of students participating; however, allowing every student the opportunity to spend all or part of a day experiencing what the next year will be like is essential to a smooth transition. You can talk to the new students all you want about what the new year will be like, but nothing beats the real deal.

**Build Community by Engaging Parents, Guardians, and Students in the Transition Process**

It's important to ensure adequate and ongoing communication with parents and guardians throughout the transition process. Be sure to provide appropriate opportunities that allow them to assist their children in getting acclimated to the new school environment.

A fun way of reaching out to parents and guardians is by hosting a barbecue at the school a week before the new year begins. This will allow parents, guardians, and students a chance to speak with the faculty and staff. The young people can also tour the building with older student guides. Provide high school students with a copy of their individual schedules, if possible, and allow them to see where each of their classes will be.

To make such an event more cost effective, try approaching the parent-teacher association or local businesses for donations or in-kind services.

**Ensure That Every Student Is Known to Teachers and Staff Ahead of Time**

Well before the first day, provide all staff with detailed information about their new students. Have each new student complete an informational sheet that has his or her picture and some fun, personal facts, such as favorite TV shows, bands, movies, or foods. Teachers and student support staff, such as the school counselor and other appropriate advisors and personnel, can use this information to make students feel welcome.

**Show Off the Best of What You Have to Offer**

Give your most energetic or dynamic staff members the chance to excite the new students and parents. Invite students to a special event (e.g., an athletic competition, interclass competition, or cocurricular event) that will give them insight into what happens both inside and outside the classroom. Create memorable opportunities for the new students that will make them want to attend the new school or grade.

**Organize Academic Assignments Around Transition Activities**

Try assigning an activity or essay that will help students visualize their experience at the next level. For example, 8th graders could be asked to write an essay about what they hope to get out of their high school experience. Then, you can create a time capsule with their letters, pictures, and other items of interest that they can open just prior to graduation to look back on what they wrote.

**Offer a Summer Academy**

This might be an expensive proposition for most school districts, but summer programs provide continuity as well as much-needed support to all students—especially those who struggle academically and cannot afford to take two months off from school. In addition to getting academic preparation, participants get to spend time in the new school with their new teachers and staff. Incorporating activities such as a field trip or project-based learning experience will help make the summer program more exciting.

**Get the Faculty on Board**

Do your faculty members really understand the role they play in the transition process? Do they realize that they are critical to helping students experience a smooth transition? Faculty members should be invited to participate in the various transition activities, such as orientation programs, a welcome barbecue, or tours. Provide opportunities for them to show off their curricula and get kids excited about what they will be learning.

**Provide an Older Student Mentor for Each New Student**

Some schools call them big brothers or big sisters; others call them peer mentors or peer leaders. It is critical to develop a formal program that solicits student volunteers to be trained to participate in the transition program.

Transitions from grade to grade or building to building should not be taken for granted. As educators, we should ensure that students understand what will be expected of them at the next level and that they feel safe, engaged, welcome, and supported. An effective transition will prepare students for a productive academic year.

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